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Terrorism Meets Reactionism

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When almost-elected president George W. Bush announced his “war on terrorism” in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, he also was launching a campaign to advance the agenda of the reactionary Right at home and abroad. This includes rolling back an already mangled federal human services sector, reverting to deficit spending for the benefit of a wealthy creditor class, increasing the repression of dissent, and expanding to a still greater magnitude the budgets and global reach of the US military and other components of the national security state. Indeed, soon after the terrorist attacks, the Wall Street Journal ran an editorial (September 19), calling on Bush to quickly take advantage of the “unique political climate” to “assert his leadership not just on security and foreign policy but across the board.” The editorial summoned the president to push quickly for more tax-rate cuts, expanded oil drilling in Alaska, fast-track authority for trade negotiations, and raids on the Social Security surplus.

More for War

Bush himself noted that the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon offer “an opportunity” to “strengthen America.” As numerous conservatives spoke eagerly of putting the country on a permanent war footing, the president proudly declared “the first war of the twenty-first century” against an unspecified enemy to extend over an indefinite time frame. Swept along in the jingoist tide, that gaggle of political wimps known as the US Congress granted Bush the power to initiate military action against any nation, organization, or individual of his choosing, without ever having to proffer evidence to justify the attack. Such an unlimited grant of arbitrary power—in violation of international law, the UN charter, and the US Constitution—transforms the almost-elected president into an absolute monarch who can exercise life-and-death power over any quarter of the world. Needless to say, numerous other nations have greeted the president’s elevation to King of the Planet with something less than enthusiasm.

And King of the Planet is how he is acting, bombing the already badly battered and impoverished country of Afghanistan supposedly to “get” Osama bin Laden. Unmentioned in all this is that US leaders have actively fostered and financed the rise of the Taliban, and have long refused to go after bin Laden. Meanwhile, the White House announces that other countries may be bombed at will and the war will continue for many years. And Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz urges that U.S. armed forces be allowed to engage in domestic law enforcement, a responsibility that has been denied the military since 1878.

Under pressure to present a united front against terrorism, Democratic legislators are rolling over on the issue of military spending. Opposition to the so-called missile defense shield seems to have evaporated, as has willingness to preserve the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. The lawmakers seem ready to come up with most of the \$8.3 billion that the White House says it needs to develop the missile defense shield and move forward with militarizing outer space. Congress is marching in lockstep behind Bush's proposal to jack up the military budget to \$328.9 billion for 2002, a spending increase of \$38.2 billion over the enacted FY 2001 budget. Additional funds have been promised to the National Security Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and other skulduggery units of the national security state.

Having been shown that the already gargantuan defense budget was not enough to stop a group of suicidal hijackers armed with box cutters, Bush and Congress thought it best to pour still more money into the pockets of the military-industrial cartel. (Incidentally, the next largest arms budget is Russia's at \$51 billion. If we add up the defense allocations of all the leading industrial nations, it comes to less than what the United States is already spending.)

Wag the Dog

Many of the measures being taken to "fight terrorism" have little to do with actual security and are public relations ploys designed to (a) heighten the nation's siege psychology and (b) demonstrate that the government has things under control. So aircraft carriers are deployed off the coast of New York to "guard the city"; national guardsmen dressed in combat fatigues and armed with automatic weapons "patrol the airports"; sidewalk baggage check-ins and electronic tickets are prohibited supposedly to create "greater security." Since increased security leads to greater inconvenience, it has been decided that greater inconvenience will somehow increase security—or at least give the appearance of greater security.

Then there is that biggest public relations ploy of all, the bombing of hillsides and villages in Afghanistan, leaving us with the reassuring image of Uncle Sam striking back at the terrorists. To stop the bombing, the Taliban offered to hand over bin Laden to a third country to stand trial, now without even seeing any evidence against him. But this was rejected by the White House. It seems that displaying US retaliatory power and establishing a military presence in that battered country are the primary US goals, not apprehending bin Laden.

Lost in all this is the fact that US leaders have been the greatest purveyors of terrorism throughout the world. In past decades they or their surrogate mercenary forces have unleashed terror bombing campaigns against unarmed civilian populations, destroying houses, schools, hospitals, churches, hotels, factories, farms, bridges, and other nonmilitary targets in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, East Timor, the Congo, Panama, Grenada, El Salvador, Guatemala, Angola, Mozambique, Somalia, Iraq, Yugoslavia, and numerous other countries, causing death and destruction to millions of innocents. Using death squad terrorism US leaders have also been successful in destroying reformist and democratic movements in scores of countries. Of course hardly a word of this is uttered in the corporate media, leaving Bush and company free to parade themselves as the champions of peace and freedom.

In time, the American people may catch wise that the reactionaries in the White House have not the slightest clue about how they are going to save us from future assaults. They seem more interested in—and are certainly more capable of—taking advantage of terrorist attacks than in

preventing them. They have neither the interest nor the will to make the kind of major changes in policy that would dilute the hatred so many people around the world feel toward US power. They are too busy handing the world over to the transnational corporate giants at the expense of people everywhere. And as of now, they have no intention of making a 180 degree shift away from unilateral global domination and toward collective betterment and mutual development.

Reactionary Offensive on the Home Front

Several bills pending in Congress are designed to expand the definition of terrorism to include all but the most innocuous forms of protest. S 1510, for example, treats terrorism as any action that might potentially put another person at risk. The bill gives the Feds power to seize the assets of any organization or individual deemed to be aiding or abetting "terrorist activity." And it can be applied retroactively without a statute of limitations. A telephone interview I did with Radio Tehran in mid-October, trying to explain why US foreign policy is so justifiably hated around the world, might qualify me for detention as someone who is abetting terrorism.

Other bills will expand the authority of law enforcement officials to use wiretaps, detain immigrants, subpoena email and Internet records, and infiltrate protest organizations. Some nine hundred people have already been rounded up and put into "preventive detention," with no charges brought against them and no legal redress. In keeping with the reactionary Right's agenda, the war against terrorism has become a cover for the war against democratic dissent and public sector services. The message is clear, America must emulate not Athens but Sparta.

One of the White House's earliest steps to protect the country from terrorist violence was to cut from the proposed federal budget the \$15.7 million slated to assist little children who are victims of domestic abuse or abandonment. Certainly a nation at war has no resources to squander on battered kids or other such frills. Instead Congress passed a \$40 billion supplemental, including \$20 billion for "recovery efforts," much of it to help clean up and repair New York's financial district.

Bush then came up with an "emergency package" for the airlines, \$5 billion in direct cash and \$10 billion in loan guarantees, with the promise of billions more. The airlines were beset by fiscal problems well before the September attacks. This bailout has little to do with fighting terrorism. The costs for greater airport security will mostly likely be picked up by the federal government. And taken together, the loss of four planes by United and American Airlines, the impending lawsuits by victims' families, and higher insurance rates do not of themselves create industry-wide insolvency, and do not justify a multibillion dollar bailout. The real story is that once the industry was deregulated, the airlines began overcapitalizing without sufficient regard for earnings, the assumption being that profits would follow after a company squeezed its competitors to the wall by grabbing a larger chunk of the market. So the profligate diseconomies of "free market" corporate competition are once more picked up by the US taxpayer—this time in the name of fighting terrorism.

Meanwhile some 80,000 airline employees were laid off in the several weeks after the terrorist attack, including ticket agents, flight attendants, pilots, mechanics, and ramp workers. They will not see a penny of the windfall reaped by the airline plutocrats and shareholders, whose patriotism does not extend to giving their employees a helping hand. At one point in the House debate, a frustrated Rep. Jay Inslee (D-Wash.) shouted out, "Why in this chamber do the big dogs always eat first?" Inslee was expressing his concerns about the 20,000 to 30,000 Boeing

workers who were being let go without any emergency allocation for their families. Sen. Peter G. Fitzgerald (R-Ill.) expressed a similar sentiment when casting the lone dissenting vote in the Senate against the airline bailout: “Congress should be wary of indiscriminately dishing out taxpayer dollars to prop up a failing industry without demanding something in return for taxpayers.” It remained for Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) to explain on behalf of the Bush warmongers why the handout was necessary: “We need to look at transportation again as part of our national defense.”

The post-September 11 anti-terrorism hype is serving as an excuse to silence any opposition to drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Our nation needs oil to maintain its strength and security, we hear. Against this manipulative message, the environment does not stand much of a chance. Likewise, US Trade representative Zoellick enlisted the terrorism hype in the White House's campaign to surrender our democratic sovereignty to corporate dominated international trade councils. In a Washington Post op-ed (September 20) Zoellick charged that opposition to fast track and globalization was akin to supporting the terrorists. House Republican leaders joined in, claiming that trade legislation was needed to solidify the global coalition fighting terrorism. Here was yet another overreaching opportunistic attempt to wrap the flag around a reactionary special interest.

Actually it is the free trade agreements that threaten our democratic sovereignty. All public programs and services that regulate or infringe in any way upon big-money corporate capitalism can be rolled back by industry-dominated oligarchic trade councils. Corporations can now tell governments—including our federal, state, and local governments—what public programs and regulations are acceptable or unacceptable. The reactionaries do not explain how giving private, nonelective, corporate-dominated trade councils a supranational supreme power to override our laws and our Constitution will help in the war against terrorism.

Looting the Surplus

The bailout to the airline industry is only part of the spending spree that the White House has in store for us. Bush now endorses a “stimulus” of \$60 billion to \$75 billion to lift the country out of recession by “recharging business investment.” He also has called for an additional \$60 billion tax cut which, like previous tax reductions, would give meager sums to ordinary folks and lavish amounts to fat cats and plutocrats. Where is all this money for defense, war, internal security, airlines, rebuilding lower Manhattan, tax cuts, and recharging the economy coming from? Much of it is from the Social Security surplus fund—which is why Bush is so eager to spend.

It is a myth that conservatives are practitioners of fiscal responsibility. Rightwing politicians who sing hymns to a balanced budget have been among the wildest deficit spenders. In twelve years (1981-1992) the Reagan-Bush administrations increased the national debt from \$850 billion to \$4.5 trillion. By early 2000, the debt had climbed to over \$5.7 trillion. The deficit is pumped up by two things: first, successive tax cuts to rich individuals and corporations—so that the government increasingly borrows from the wealthy creditors it should be taxing, and second, titanic military budgets. In twelve years, the Reagan-Bush expenditures on the military came to \$3.7 trillion. In eight years, Bill Clinton spent over \$2 trillion on the military.

The payments on the national debt amount to about \$350 billion a year, representing a colossal upward redistribution of income from working taxpayers to rich creditors. The last two Clinton

budgets were the first to trim away the yearly deficit and produce a surplus. The first Bush budget also promised to produce a surplus, almost all of it from Social Security taxes. As a loyal representative of financial interests, George W., like his daddy, prefers the upward redistribution of income that comes with a large deficit. The creditor class, composed mostly of superrich individuals and financial institutions, wants this nation to be in debt to it—the same way it wants every other nation to be in debt to it.

Furthermore, the reactionary enemies of Social Security have long argued that the fund will eventually become insolvent and must therefore be privatized (We must destroy the fund in order to save it.) But with Social Security continuing to produce record surpluses, this argument becomes increasingly implausible. By defunding Social Security, either through privatization or deficit spending or both, Bush achieves a key goal of the reactionary agenda.

How Far the Flag?

As of October 2001, almost-elected president Bush sported a 90 percent approval rating, as millions rallied around the flag. A majority support his military assault upon the people of Afghanistan, in the mistaken notion that this will stop terrorism and protect US security. But before losing heart, keep a few things in mind. There are millions of people who, though deeply disturbed by the terrible deeds of September 11, and apprehensive about future attacks, are not completely swept up in the reactionary agenda. Taking an approach that would utilize international law and diplomacy has gone unmentioned in the corporate media, yet 30 percent of Americans support that option, compared to 54 percent who support military actions (with 16 percent undecided) according to a recent Gallup poll. Quite likely a majority of Americans would support an international law approach if they had ever heard it discussed and explained seriously.

In any case, there are millions of people in the US who want neither protracted wars nor a surrender of individual rights and liberties, nor drastic cuts in public services and retirement funds. Tens of thousands have taken to the streets not to hail the chief but to oppose his war and his reactionary agenda. Even among the flag-waivers, support for Bush seems to be a mile wide and an inch deep. The media-pumped jingoistic craze that grips the United States today is mostly just that, a craze. In time, it grows stale and reality returns. One cannot pay the grocery bills with flags or pay the rent with vengeful slogans.

My thoughts go back to another President Bush, George the first, who early in 1991 had an approval rating of 93 percent, and a fawning resolution from Congress hailing his “unerring leadership.” Yet within the year, he was soundly defeated for reelection by a garrulous governor from Arkansas. Those who believe in democracy must be undeterred in their determination to educate, organize, and agitate. In any case, swimming against the current is always preferable to being swept over the waterfall.

Among Michael Parenti’s recent books are *[History as Mystery](#)*, and the 7th edition of *[Democracy for the Few](#)*.